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Rural Crime

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This chapter considers questions of rurality in the context of rural crime. Law and criminology debate what constitutes rural crime and how it should be addressed with sometimes conflicting perspectives on whether rural crime is subject to a strict legalistic classification or a moralistic one sometimes found in environmental or species justice discourse. This chapter critically evaluates different perspectives on rural crime and its law enforcement and policy problems.

Defining Rural Crime

Chapter One of this book indicates the difficulties of measuring rurality and its classification according to a combination of population density and distance from major settlements. Problems also occur in the classification of rural crime in part because rural crime has been neglected as an area of criminological study (Donnermeyer Jones and Barclay, 2006) but also because practitioners and policymakers operate different classifications, thus no consistent definition of rural crime exists across the criminological or policy literature. Instead rural crime is defined according to a range of demographical, economical, social or cultural factors according to the ideological perspectives of different bodies involved in rural crime enforcement or policy. One definition of rural crime is that of “*small towns, farming communities and the open countryside*” (Donnermeyer 1995) whereas the UK police generally use a definition based on population density. However the British Crime Survey (which measures citizens’ experience and fear of crime) uses ACORD, a classification of residential neighbourhoods, a more detailed classification based on demographic, employment and housing information and which analyses housing on the basis of whether it is rural, urban or inner-city. Rural crime may, thus be classified according to where it takes place, via an operational policing perspective which defines rural crime as simply any crime that happens in a rural area, but may also be classified according to its rural specific nature (e.g. poaching or wildlife crimes such as badger baiting). In the latter case, rural crimes may fall within a wider definition of environmental or green crimes which Lynch and Stretesky (2003) define as acts that “(1) may or may not violate existing rules and environmental regulations; (2) [have] identifiable environmental damage outcomes; and (3) originated in human action” (Lynch and Stretesky 2003:227). This incorporates a moral perspective employed by some NGOs which argues that while some green crimes may not contravene any existing law, where they result in or possess the potential to result in environmental and human harm, they should be classified as crimes.

Criminology often classifies rural crime within green criminology according to White’s (2008a) notion of animal rights and species justice, which deals with animal abuse and suffering (including crimes impacting on animals in the wild and animal cruelty or welfare offences involving farmed animals) or as environmental or ecological crimes which considers environmental justice in relation to the use of natural resources in defined geographical areas (White 2008b). Rural crime is interpreted and classified as part of a green perspective (South 1998) which considers crimes that affect the environment, its natural resources and the species that depend upon it as incorporating particular notions of environmental and ecological justice and requiring a criminal justice response that reflects a concern with environmental or species rights issues and a sensitivity to crimes that cause harm to biodiversity.

However these definitions are not consistently applied either in the policing or the policy response to rural crime.

Police Perspectives

Sorokin, Zimmerman and Galpin (1931) studied rural crime concluding that crime in the rural context of the United States and numerous European countries was much lower than urban crime rates. In part this reflects the diverse nature of rural areas with wider, less densely populated areas, offering less opportunity for traditionally numerous crimes of burglary and other property crimes as well as a more sparse population less prone to inter-personal violence. But it also reflects the fact that rural areas may define and record crime differently and are generally served by fewer criminal justice agencies (Weisheit, Falcone and Wells 2006) and a more multi-disciplinary approach to policing sometimes with a greater emphasis on community policing than intelligence-led techniques. Reiner's (2000) 'cop culture' theory is also of relevance. This dictates that the police classify crime according to its merits and cohesion with accepted notions of policing. Some crimes are defined as 'rubbish' and not worthy of police time (Reiner, 2000) while other crimes are classified as having value; the sort of thing that both police managers and operational officers consider they should be doing. Thus a classification of rural crime that includes such activities as theft/damage to farm equipment, rural drug use and poaching with the association of 'good class' villains that the police are there to apprehend is likely to be accepted, while 'lesser' offences such as fly-tipping and animal theft are not. However, these lesser offences are of interest to NGOs and the wider rural community.

[Insert Section on Neighbourhood policing and the 'crime fighters versus peacekeepers' debate as applied to rural crime]

NGO Perspectives

NGOs are not usually involved in practical law enforcement, but in rural crime (broadly defined), there are NGOs that both assist the police and prosecutors and NGOs that actively detect, investigate and prosecute crime. It is also an area where NGOs have traditionally collated information on the amount of crime that exists while the statutory enforcement authorities (police, Customs etc.) have only recorded crime data on an ad-hoc basis. One consequence of this is that NGOs have, traditionally, been in a better position than the statutory authorities to say how much rural crime, particularly that affecting wildlife or the environment, exists, and what the key problems are. This has given NGOs a position of considerable influence in directing the law enforcement agenda to areas where they have a specific interest and where they have acquired considerable expertise. In effect, rural crime allows for the study of 'private policing' in an area of criminal justice policy where a considerable amount of law enforcement activity is still carried out on a voluntary basis by private bodies such as the RSPCA's uniformed Inspectorate (in respect of animal welfare crimes and crimes such as badger baiting and badger digging) or the RSPB's Investigations Section which takes the lead on the investigation of some wildlife crime cases before they are taken over by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). Whereas in some areas, such as street crime, police functions are being privatised with the introduction of private security patrols, use of police community support officers (PCSOs) and street wardens, rural crime is an area where the policing function has traditionally been

carried out by NGOs where it involves non-standard offences, and it is only recently that the police have become active in operational law enforcement of wildlife and environmental offences and are under pressure from NGOs to become more involved.

However, the role of NGOs varies according to the types of crime involved, with different policy perspectives pursued in respect of game offences and poaching, habitat destruction and pollution, or offences involving domestic/farm animals and animal welfare and cruelty offences. The relationship between NGOs and policymakers also varies so that, for example, game offences are considered to be effectively policed because the UK has strong game and anti-poaching legislation and there is good co-operation between the police and game rearing staff over poaching. Game rearing staff provide an effective monitoring force for poaching offences and regularly report these crimes (which directly affect their livelihoods) to statutory agencies but the same is not true of wildlife offences such as bird of prey persecution where game rearing staff are often suspects and may be in conflict with the police and conservationists over how they should be dealt with.

Complex attitudes to rural crime exist where resistance to legislation to control traditional rural field sports continues, while NGOs sometimes continue to pursue an abolitionist agenda on moral grounds seeking to criminalise or regulate rural activities such as shooting and fishing. The campaign against the *Hunting Act 2004* was often characterised as ‘town versus country’ (Burns et al. 2000) and discussions of traditional fieldsports and hunting activities that become subject to legislation often contain debates concerning perceptions that affluent sections of society seek to impose their will on poorer rural members of society. Lowe and Ginsberg (2002) concluded that the animal rights movement (in the US) has a disproportionately well-educated membership reflecting what Parkin (1968) called ‘middle class radicalism’. Certainly the NGOs involved in wildlife crime in the UK while not all pursuing policies from an animal rights perspective represent a professional movement comprising large professional organisations (comparable with medium to large businesses) rather than being a grass roots or ‘activists’ movement. Figures for certain major wildlife or animal protection NGOs show annual running costs typically in excess of £50 million per organisation (see for example RSPB 2010, RSPCA 2005, 2006). The public support that these organisations have (the RSPB has over a million members) together with the resources available for campaigning and political lobbying, allows the main environmental NGOs to take the lead in promoting rural crime as an issue of importance. It also places the organisations in a position to employ expertise, for example, specialist investigators and political lobbyists, to promote their policy objectives and adopt a position of being expert in their chosen field, while their socio-economic position allows them to exploit that perceived expertise.

Rural Criminality

Smith (2010) argues that ‘we only have a fuzzy notion of the stereotypical rural criminal and find it difficult to acknowledge the existence of a rural criminal underclass’. Yet the opportunities provided to rural criminals make it likely that specific types of offending endemic to rural areas exist, classifications of rural crime notwithstanding. The author’s research on wildlife crime, for example, identified

distinct types of offender (Nurse 2011) involved in those rural crimes containing a wildlife element, concluding that in addition to the 'traditional' criminal who commits offences for financial gain, other specific offender types exist. The dictates of countryside employment, particularly in the game rearing industry creates *economic criminals* who commit wildlife crimes as a direct result of particular economic pressures (e.g. direct employer-pressure or profit driven crime within their chosen profession). *Masculinities criminals* - who commit offences involving harm to animals are drawn to the countryside where their quarry (e.g. game or wild birds, badgers, hares) can be found and where they exercise a stereotypical masculine nature both in terms of their exercise of power over animals and the links to sport and gambling involved in such activities as hare coursing, badger baiting and badger digging. Finally *hobby criminals* who commit crimes for which there is no direct benefit or underlying criminal 'need', such as collecting wild birds eggs or dead wild animals for taxidermy purposes, attract a criminal justice reaction which is often disproportionate.

Offenders involved in the exploitation of wildlife, farm animals or the rural environment can commit their crimes for the following general reasons:

1. Profit or commercial gain
2. Thrill or sport
3. Necessity of obtaining food
4. Antipathy towards governmental and law enforcement bodies
5. Tradition and cultural reasons

While these are the *primary* motivations and others may be involved, certain specific offences can only take place in rural areas (e.g. hare coursing, badger baiting, illegal fox hunting) so that criminality has either emerged in a rural setting or adapted to it.

[Theory on travelling criminals?]

The Challenge of Policing Rural Crime

The majority of policing theory and literature focuses on urban crime and is usually based on an urban model of social organisation which sees crime as primarily dealt with through community engagement and a combination of proactive and reactive policing. However Mawby (2007) comments that the 'crime prevention issues [in rural areas] may be qualitatively different from those facing criminal justice agencies in the cities' as crime occurs in a changing social landscape which is 'affected by demographic changes, changing crime trends and by the introduction of new policing practices' (Smith 2010). While some common crimes such as theft and violence occur both in rural and urban areas, rural areas have distinct crime problems that do not readily occur in urban areas. Problems of (illegal) migrant workers are often more pronounced in rural areas as are problems of fly-tipping, mass trespass (associated with music festivals and other countryside gatherings) and unlawful use of off-road vehicles. In addition, rural specific crimes such as wildlife crime or poaching present specific challenges for rural police forces that may lack both the expertise and resources to deal with non-standard policing challenges.

[Insert Control theory Section applied to rural crime] Jobes et al (2004) identified that crime generally decreased across an urban-rural continuum and more cohesive and integrated community structures had less crime, while highly disorganised communities generally had higher crime levels. Sparsely populated areas lack informal controls that keep crime in check and in some areas crimes involving exploitation of wildlife or natural resources may even be tolerated where the community benefits from doing so.

[Social organisation theory reference to game rearing areas, employment and cultural association/involvement with fieldsports as traditional activity??]

When rural crime does occur it sometimes receives disproportionate attention. The UK environmental NGO network often has a significant role to play in rural crime issues with a number of NGOs carrying out formal law enforcement activities or being heavily engaged in political activity aimed at improving the enforcement of UK environmental legislation. Mingay (1989) suggests that the image of the countryside as a safe place to live is an important social construction such that when crime occurs in the countryside its threat value is perceived as greater. As a result the attention of outside agencies including NGOs may result in policy and enforcement activity influenced by a sense of outrage but which is actively resisted by a community which does not recognise the legitimacy of the enforcer.

An Inclusive Approach?

While politicians and other policymakers operate according to a definition of rural crime that defines it as crime occurring in rural areas and affecting the wider rural community, NGOs and some practitioners view rural crime as predominantly crime affecting wildlife and its habitats. Rural crime may not only attract individuals wishing to exploit a rural setting (and resources) necessary to the commission of crime but also creates opportunities for those involved in criminal activity to adapt their offending to take advantage of the availability of wildlife, farm equipment and the relative lack of informal social control or policing to commit their crimes. As a result, the specific challenges of rural policing (e.g. generally lower resources, wider geographical areas to cover) remain both operational policing and policy problems and the link between rural crimes and other forms of offending are not fully addressed in policy or practice.

[New inclusive definition and policy recommendation to be inserted]

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